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ASSOCIATED PRESS
22 April 1987

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WASHINGTON

The daughter of an American pilot killed flying weapons to Contra guerrillas said today she hopes the Nicaraguan government has _ and will hand over _ papers that may prove her contention her father worked for a secret, U.S.-based effort to supply the rebels.

"It is just a big mess," Patty French said of her efforts to sort out her father's estate.

French, who lives in Long Beach, Calif., said in a telephone interview that she thinks her father's missing personal papers may be in the hands of the Sandinistas, who shot down a C-123K cargo plane over Nicaragua last Oct. 5.

Her father, William J. Cooper, 61, died, along with Wallace B. Sawyer Jr., 41, another pilot, and a Nicaraguan. Eugene Hasenfus, 45, of Marinette, Wis., was captured, but later released.

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French, a Navy employee, said she has made repeated efforts through the State Department to contact the Nicaraguan government to see if it has her father's briefcase. So far, she has not gotten an answer.

If she can get the papers, French thinks they may reveal Cooper's employer. Although French has no proof, she is convinced from talking to her father's friends that he was hired, perhaps indirectly, by the network operated by retired Maj. Gen. Richard V. Secord and an associate, retired Col. Robert C. Dutton.

Secord, who has refused requests for interviews for months, is thought by federal and congressional investigators to have played a key role in supplying weapons to the Contras at a time when Congress banned military aid to the rebels.

Both French and Sawyer's father, Wallace B. Sawyer Sr., said the pilots left outstanding credit card bills from their time in Central America.

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"Those bills were incurred in his line of work," Wallace B. Sawyer Sr. said.

The elder Sawyer, interviewed Tuesday by telephone in Magnolia, Ark., said there is a lapsed credit card bill of about \$3,500, as well as burial costs of about \$875. An unknown person earlier paid about \$3,000 for the funeral, he said.

"There has not been a settlement made by his employer," said the elder Sawyer, noting that his son left a Thai-born wife, Kasanee, and a 4-year-old son. The family is living off Social Security and a lump sum payment from a private insurance company, he said.

After the crash, the State Department paid to have Sawyer's body flown home from Managua, Nicaragua, even though the department usually doesn't pick up the tab for Americans killed abroad, department spokeswoman Ruth Van Heuven said.

"Unique circumstances called for an exception" in the Sawyer case, she said, adding that the Sandinistas had dumped the pilots' bodies outside the U.S. Embassy after the crash. Cooper's body was cremated, French said.

Mary Rodgers at the Lewis Funeral Home in Magnolia said an unidentified man walked in and handed the firm an envelope full of cash the day of Sawyer's funeral. Van Heuven said the U.S. government did not contribute toward Sawyer's burial.

In the first step toward determining who hired Sawyer, the family has filed a petition in Columbia County's probate court seeking an administrator for the estate.

The procedure could lead to a lawsuit against Sawyer's unknown employer, or against a third party, possibly the federal government, said family lawyer Winslow Drummond in Little Rock, Ark.

Although the CIA and other government agencies denied they knew anything about the cargo plane after it crashed last year, a report by a presidential review board showed that top White House officials were notified about the accident almost immediately.

Computer messages in the so-called Tower report indicated the plane was part of a private aid network for the Contras that Lt. Col. Oliver North allegedly helped run from the National Security Council. North was fired for allegedly helping to divert profits from the secret sale of weapons to Iran to the Contras.

"One of the Democracy Inc. aircraft apparently went down on a resupply mission to (Contra) forces in the north," Robert Earl, who shared an office with North, reported Oct. 6, 1986 to then-National Security Adviser John Poindexter. "I will keep you advised of details as I get them," Earl wrote. North was out of the country when the crash occurred.

North coined the term Project Democracy to refer to the private aid network.

The elder Sawyer said his son and other aviators were "all pilots for money." But he said he had no evidence of a signed agreement with any company.

Hasenfus, who recently visited the Sawyer family in Magnolia, said he was hired by the Pennsylvania-based Corporate Air Services, an affiliate of Southern Air Transport, a Miami-based company formerly owned by the CIA.

The head of Corporate Air, Edward T. de Garay, has been granted limited immunity from prosecution concerning testimony he might give the congressional committees investigating the Iran-Contra affair.

Southern Air denied any connection with the downed cargo plane, but company spokesman William Kress said Sawyer was employed by the company until 1985. Sawyer, a graduate of the Air Force Academy, flew military cargo missions in Thailand until he resigned.